

Washington, D.C. - Congressman Sam Farr (D-Carmel) and Congressman Jon Porter (R-Nev.) introduced legislation today aimed at improving America's image abroad by encouraging international travelers to visit the United States. They were joined by several industry leaders who applauded efforts by the co-chairs of the Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus.

The "Improving Public Diplomacy through International Travel Act" calls upon the Secretary of State to enhance diplomatic relations with foreign countries and to advance domestic business interests abroad by establishing a competitive grant program to increase international travel to the United States. Those selected to receive a grant are directed to use the funds for the development of a travel program focused on the top five international markets, beginning with Canada the first year and adding one country each year (Mexico, United Kingdom, Japan, Germany). In order to receive a grant, recipients must provide matching funds from a non-federal source equal to the initial grant amount.

"Our national image abroad has seen a steady decline for many years, and it's long overdue that we take active steps to improve it," said Rep. Farr. "I know from my years in the Peace Corps that people-to-people contact is the best way to genuinely understand another culture. With fewer international visitors coming to America, we're missing that crucial link. This bill seeks to improve our image by encouraging foreign visitors to visit Main Street, U.S.A."

Currently, foreign markets appropriate resources to stimulate their travel and tourism industries; the United Kingdom (\$80 million) and Australia (\$113 million) are dramatically outspending the United States (\$4 million) on international travel promotion. A recent survey conducted by the Discover America Partnership found that international travelers ranked the United States as having the world's worst entry process and discovered a general perception that the United States is not welcoming to international visitors.

"America's economic security, national security and public diplomacy efforts are directly linked with the travel and tourism industries," said Rep. Porter. "This legislation will enhance public diplomacy efforts and facilitate greater understanding of our nation when there are more people coming to the United States, interacting with our citizens and patronizing our businesses."

According to a recent report released by the Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, an office of the U.S. Department of Commerce, between 2000 and 2006, Miami has experienced a 33 percent decline in foreign visitors; Boston is seeing 25 percent fewer visitors, and 21 percent fewer.

Travel and tourism is one of America's largest industries, generating over \$100 billion in tax revenue on the federal, state and local level and employing more than 7 million people, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. Travel is one of the few industries that touches all 50 states and contributes to all local economies. The decline in foreign visitors has cost the United States \$94 billion in visitor spending, \$15.6 billion in tax receipts, \$26 billion in payroll and an estimated 194,000 jobs.

Reps. Farr and Porter were joined at a Wednesday press conference by Rep. Bill Delahunt (D-Mass.); Roger Dow, president of the Travel Industry Association; Bill Hardman, president of the Southeast Tourism Society; Caroline Beteta, executive director of the California Travel and Tourism Commission; Rossi Rallenkotter, president and CEO of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority; and Congressman Jim Santini, a former Representative from Nevada currently with the National Tour Association. Reps. Delahunt and Roy Blunt (D-Mo.) are original cosponsors of the bill.

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